

Enclosures & Discontents

Primitive Accumulation and Resistance under Globalised Capital

In the global present, violent conflict, crisis and austerity politics, and corporate expansion are forcing new and reworked forms of dispossession and enclosure, but also kindling new and reworked modes of resistance. The violence of what Marx referred to as 'primitive accumulation' – the transformation of the social means of production into capital by means of mass dispossession – would therefore appear to be very much alive in our times. This special feature has been conceived to consider the extent to which the concept of primitive accumulation has analytical purchase in the present, the degree to which it requires adjustment, and the ways in which peasant and Indigenous critiques demand its reformulation or even its abandonment.

In Marx's formulation, itself adapted from that of Adam Smith, primitive accumulation described the processes by which the capitalist mode of production is violently instigated. Marx's theory further relied on a dual aspect by which separation from the land in the form of dispossession, along with integration into the labour market in the form of proletarianisation, combine simultaneously to violently dislocate Indigenous and other non-capitalist communities from their diverse, often communitarian and self-sufficient, means of production.

The articles brought together within this special feature variously interrogate four prominent points of contention in Marx's original theorisation. The first of these is the temporal assumption invested in primitive accumulation as a set of ordinary processes occurring to instigate capitalist integration; processes which are therefore understood to be prior to, and separate from, subsequent patterns of accumulation. Vital adjustments of Marx's work have sought to correct this temporal restriction and bring dispossession within broader theories of accumulation by drawing attention to the repetitive and ongoing enclosures found broadly across the global economy (for example, Harvey 2004; Kropotkin 1995; De Angelis 2001)

In close relation to this temporal critique, the second point of contention concerns the weighting of Marx's focus on the dual processes of dispossession and proletarianisation, with overwhelming analytical attention being placed on the latter, as the expropriation of the labourer, rather than the former, the expropriation of the land. This has been a particular source of discontent for Indigenous intellectuals who emphasise that the devastation of dislocation from the land for their communities has often been combined in reality with the *rejection* of Indigenous labour. Colonial-capitalist development, extended through policies of extermination in settler-colonial contexts has often placed little or no value on Indigenous labour, leaving repetitive land expropriation as the most pressing form of violence for analysis (see for example, Coulthard 2014; Wolfe 2001; Abele & Stasiulis 1989).

The third point of contention rests on understandings of primitive accumulation as fundamentally a rural process. By way of corrective to this, the work collected in this feature largely explores instead how primitive accumulation and resistance to it are reconstituting notions of the urban, both inside and outside of the city; at the same time as theoretical developments around 'planetary urbanism' push us to altogether reconsider these old distinct mappings of urban and rural.

Finally, the fourth notable point of contestation holds that the transformations of primitive accumulation (and the derived formulation of accumulation by dispossession) are often analysed as though they occur across undifferentiated spaces and bodies, rather than in relation to raced and gendered productions of difference. Scholars often overlook the ways in which racialised bodies and spaces are particularly produced as

expropriable through raced modes of dispossession, and recent work has sought to draw attention to this by way of remedy (see Chakravartty & Silva 2012; Mollett 2016; Federici 2004).

This City special feature adds empirical and theoretical contributions to the current conversation on structured dispossession in the present. If Glen Coulthard (2014: 8) urges us to hold on to Marx, but insists that “rendering [his] theoretical frame relevant [...] requires that it be transformed in conversation with the critical thought and practices of Indigenous peoples themselves” the papers gathered here at least partly heed this call by engaging with those struggling with violent dispossession on the ground. The challenge for critical theory and left political strategy, as Coulthard argues, is to reach a deeper understanding of the injustice of dispossession such that resistance and the making of alternative worlds might be better enabled.

Dispossession and the urban

Urban scholars focusing on the global North have appropriated original and subsequent Marxist formulations of primitive accumulation in order to understand dynamic processes of urban transformation in the contemporary period. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that, at the advent of globalisation managed by the bureaucratic, “neo-capitalist” state, land and property capital had come to form the “primary” mode of capital accumulation (2003; 159). In this formulation, the “*capital switch*” denotes a historical moment wherein over-accumulation within the primary circuit (labour-capital) is “fixed” by state managed urbanisation. The advent of neoliberalism in the global North in the 1980s saw the deregulation of property and finance capital together with the mass privatisation of public housing, infrastructures and governance. In this period, the state “rescaled” to regional and municipal nodes, transforming cities into entrepreneurial “growth machines” that mobilise public urban assets such as housing, common land, post-industrial space and “blighted” working-class communities for accumulative purposes (Molotch 1976; Harvey 1989; Sassen 2001). The contemporary city has thus been conceptualised as “revanchist” (Smith 1996), deeply splintered and segregating (Graham and Marvin 2001) governed and managed by new state configurations that flexibly regulate and broker the uneven valorisation and de-valorisation of urban space for global capital.

In *The New Imperialism* (2003) Harvey cites the privatisation of land, displacement of peasant communities, and the consolidation of private property rights, among other factors, as evidence that primitive accumulation remains “powerfully present” in the contemporary period. For Harvey, the processes he terms “accumulation by dispossession”, which have fundamentally reshaped urban areas across the globe, are a response to the over-accumulation of capital within the primary circuit. The applications of Harvey’s over-accumulation thesis to understandings of accumulative dispossession have been critiqued on two fronts. First, over-accumulation type analyses tend to abstract universal claims from specific political and geographical contexts of the global North. Other historical and political contexts are then presented as some variation of a universal mode of dispossession emanating from Europe and North America. Second, and relatedly, the over-accumulation thesis often fails to provide a full account of the political and contested nature in which contemporary urban processes, dispossession, gentrification, and privatisation, are carried out. Capital’s “switch” to the urban was not automatic nor uncontested but rather wrought through and fundamentally shaped by class, race, and gender struggles, oppositional urban social movements, and broader geographically specific political configurations (Federici 2004; De Angelis 2007; Sanyal 2014; Levien 2015).

Feminist, Indigenous, subaltern and global South scholarship on urbanisation has thus sought to draw attention to the manner in which dispossession is carried out within particular historical and geographical contexts through specific articulations of capital, state and social relations (refs). Scholars of urban India for example, have drawn attention to the role of colonial legacies of power (Goswami 2004; Legg 2007), relations of gender, caste and indigeneity (Gidwani 2008; Shah 2010) and flexible practices of State territoriality (Chatterjee 2004) in shaping uneven practices of dispossession in the contemporary period.

Roy's (2009) work in this regard draws attention to practice of flexible state practices governmentality through which the Indian state flexibly manages the production of uneven geographies of accumulation. Informality denotes the flexible practice of governance – often carried out by public-private bodies – that includes extra-legal and discursive territorial practices, un-mapping peasant land, violating planning regulations, *and* the violent dispossession of small landholders. For Roy, the dispossession and stark inequality that mark India's new urban and infrastructural landscapes are not regulated by formal and informal, productive and nonproductive distinctions, but rather produced "in fractal fashion" (2009: 826) as particular expressions of the Indian state's relation to global capital.

Against Dispossession

From the earliest period, violent forms of primitive accumulation have been met with forms of resistance, from enclosures within Europe, through European colonialism across the globe, building up to contemporary cases - from the Naxalites and Narmada Bachan Andolan in India to anti-foreclosure activists in the US. Indigenous communities, peasant and land-rights activists have organized some of the most audacious and militant forms of resistance to land grabs from anti-enclosure upheavals, land-rights mobilizations, tenants unions, and rents strikes. Such actions have variously challenged landlords, government officials, military and police, moneylenders, and extractive industries operatives. However, communities have also pursued 'quiet' and enduring forms of resistant cultivation, from maroonage and secret cultivation by plantation labourers, to other forms of commoning as colonial-capitalist refusal. Indeed, people with connections to the land have never been passive victims but have instead been active vectors in resisting their own violent dispossession. But what does it mean to resist dispossessive processes? When we speak of resistance to capitalism to many on the left, particularly those of those of the Marxist tradition, a dialectical tension arises between the brutality of dispossession and the emancipatory potential of accumulation.

Ranajit Guha's seminal text *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) intervenes over the question of peasant subjectivity. Hitherto the representation of peasants was relegated to the context of 'pre-history', temporally separated from capitalism and spatially excluded from the urban, never in their own terms. This deprived peasants of agency and, at the same time, posited modernism and so-called progress away from 'backwardness' as the ideological foundation for programs of mass dispossession by successive governments in India, including left-wing governments in states such as West Bengal.

Such stagism has been part of a general erasure of peasants, Indigenous, or the subaltern as active subjects in the shaping of global capitalism, as well as alternative ways of being. Academic research all too often reflects the subordinate position of peasant, tribal, and Indigenous communities in society. The forms of resistance that reach western audiences through scholarship are the formal and public kinds which, despite their sometimes radical character, are largely mediated through and animated by

an urban petit-bourgeoisie intelligentsia. The geographic and social position of the subaltern and Indigenous groups and their struggles cannot be de-linked. Attacks on the property and position of landed elites do not simply form an assemblage of rebellion against development – a kind of luddites of the land – but in effect delimit the desires of the proprietors of ‘development’ and the mandarins of the city. Within this context, we accept that primitive accumulation may be understood as universal, but we aim to challenge orthodox understandings of its conception and bring out specific formations of communal resistance to it - from that of the Indigenous of Mexico to farmers in Gaza and war-ravaged migrants in Beirut.

This Special Feature

The contributions are opened with the article *Primitive Accumulation in Indigenous Mexico: The Contested Transformations of the Maya Solar of Yucatán*. Ana Cabrera Pacheco, herself of Maya heritage and raised in Yucatán, focuses her analysis on the peri-urban settlement of Espita where over half of the population is Indigenous Maya. More specifically, Pacheco concentrates on a form of land relation known as the *solar*, a partly communal space with private plots organised around a common central area. Engaging a historical method, as well as a modification of the Marxist theory of primitive accumulation by means of decolonial thought, Pacheco traces rounds of enclosure and dispossession which have transformed *solar*-based livelihoods in various phases from the Spanish colonial era through to NAFTA in the present day. Rather than referring to a pure form of pre-capitalist/colonial land relation, the *solar* has itself been produced over time by means of various rounds of enclosure, dispossession, and resistance.

Rationalisation in the Spanish colonial period was a racialised and violent process which imposed an external hierarchy of relations and integrated the Maya into the global economic system. However, the analysis arising from Pacheco’s historical method reminds us that resistance has always been an integral part of the transformative processes commonly referred to primitive accumulation. In this sense, these processes are far from unidirectional and inevitable. Collective means of relating to the land have been repeatedly re-established even as Spanish colonial rule compelled the rationalisation of land into individual plots. Further, in the present-day NAFTA context, the re-creation of the commons continues, despite the fact that the Maya are compelled to move towards increasingly individuated understandings of land relations. On the whole, Pacheco’s article reminds us that processes of racialisation have long been central to dispossession and enclosure, and that the continuous resistance of Indigenous groups, read as decoloniality, must always be considered within analyses of primitive accumulation.

In an article entitled, *Luddites in the Congo? Analysing Violent Responses to the Expansion of Industrial Mining Amidst Militarization*, Judith Verweijen explores the dynamic interaction between particular historical conditions of anti-imperial militarisation, practices of artisanal small-scale mining, and global capital investments in large-scale industrial mining. Verweijen’s paper builds on Tilly and Tarrow (2007)’s understanding of the multiple “contentious repertoires” engaged in by a variety of actors in opposition to dispossession and displacement. Verweijen’s contribution draws attention to the manner in which historic fractured anti-imperialist and post-Independence armed social movements contradictorily mobilise, to both facilitate the movement of global capital into mining areas and elsewhere as key actors in the resistance against dispossession and displacement from the mines. Verweijen, understands the messy, often contradictory, politics of what she terms ‘politico-military entrepreneurs’ as an expression of “contentious politics”. A key objective of the paper is to demonstrate how the discourses

and practices of historic armed resistance groups provide the political space and unlikely source of inspiration for non-violent resistance to flourish within heavily militarised contexts.

For the author, the role of rent-seeking armed groups in relation to global mining capital, is not simply to facilitate contentious dispossession and displacement of artisanal miners through repression and violence; local 'politico-military entrepreneurs' are also active in supporting non-violent direct resistance to dispossession. Verweijen thus makes the analogy with the character of General Ludd, a mythical military figure through which early 19th century English textile workers framed their oppositional politics to automation. In 21st century eastern DRC, the various factions of politico-military entrepreneurs, who strategically position themselves on the side of global capital and/or social movements, so too come to frame broader popular movements in opposition to industrial mining.

In "*The Golden "Salto Mortale" in the Era of Crisis*" Tsavdaroglou, Petrakos and Makrygianni take us to the urban-rural struggles against international mining in Skouries, Greece. The authors draw from a broad range of Marxist, autonomist and intersectional feminist literature to "widen" the analytical space of the mine out from its immediate location. The paper takes Marx's poetic conceptualisation of the commodity's "salto mortale" as an entry point to analysing the heterogeneous character of global capital investment in the Skouries mine. For the authors, circuits of capital that demand constant processes of primitive accumulation, are matched by heterogeneous, trans-spatial circuits of struggle articulated between various political identities that have the potential to come together to obstruct and interrupt accumulation through the mine.

The contribution from Phillip Proudfoot, entitled *The Smell of Blood: Accumulation by Dispossession, Resistance and the Language of Populist Uprising in Syria*, touches a live subject by taking as its entry point the question of migrants in Syria, with ethnography as its methodological tool. Proudfoot introduces us to the concept of the "rebel-workers" – exploring new vistas and tension between political dispossession and political agency. We are taken through the events in Syria, events that would come to define politics in both the occident and orient, through the eyes of those who were there. Seemingly abstruse theories are excavated with rich detail, from below, through life histories and over a *longue duree*. The basic premise is that the events of the Syrian uprising and the Syrian state's response created its own "revolutionary subjectivity" (understood here as a close cousin to Marx's "class consciousness") This marks a point when individuals see themselves as part of a broader collective united by a common goal upending a regime or radically transforming a society. That this subjectivity didn't begin with the Arab spring, nor as a response to the repressive state apparatus of Assad's forces, but were rather long brewing and grew out of mounting grievances at the economic base, generated through the protracted assault on 'social reproduction'. The claim here is that Syria was more or less a state socialist system that began its twenty-year decline as the Berlin Wall fell. State elites were siphoning off resources, transforming from a domestic bourgeoisie into a full comprador class, whilst Assad appropriated the language of class, socialism and struggle, whilst simultaneously tightening the controls on leftist parties and trade unions. This period marked a deterioration of everyday Syrians' living standards. These grievances at the base did not neatly cohere into a revolutionary praxis and would often take the form of conspiratorial phantasmagoria and dreams of sectarian purification. Ultimately, Proudfoot argues, it was not the Euro-American discourses of 'human rights' or 'free speech' or 'democracy' that drove the political rupture but the economics of late capitalism that led to popular resistance and the physical dispossession of the rebel-workers. It was the regime's

appropriation of the language of class that ultimately discredited it from the lexicon of resistance.

Finally, in *Farming the Front Line: Gaza's Activist Farmers in the No Go Zones*, Ron Smith takes us behind the blockade to the 'no go' areas of the Gaza Strip. In Gaza these 'no go' areas enforced by the Israeli military represent 30% of all total arable land in Gaza. Access to food is therefore greatly hampered by the brutality of the occupation and by the enforcement restrictions on farming within Gaza. Smith conducted his research on the farmers of Gaza who risk the lethal violence by Israel's forces to grow essential food crops, arguing that these areas constitute zones of primitive accumulation. Central to his argument is the notion of *sumoud*, or steadfastness – the shared Palestinian sense of duty to the homeland. Since the farmers, fishers, and rubble gatherers are actively targeted by the occupying forces, their essential role in sustaining both the lives and resistance of the Gazan population has helped to make durable the sense of *sumoud* amongst those involved in such tasks. These farmers are not formally organized politically, however, they maintain a political ideology that undergirds their position vis-à-vis the no go areas.

In light of the conditions in Gaza, agricultural areas are targeted by the occupation precisely because they represent the 'breadbasket' of the Strip, or are a "means of ameliorating the metabolic rift expressed in the overcrowded cities and camps". Despite the understanding of primitive accumulation as linked to capitalist development, Gaza and Palestine have suffered from systemic de-development under the violence of colonial occupation. Similar to Proudfoot's claim around "revolutionary subjectivity" Smith sees the farmers who brave the no-go areas as taking a form of "subaltern agency" in their confrontation with authority and hegemony.

When drawn together in this way, the contributions to this special feature bring into comparative relief understandings and experiences of those processes Marx would recognise to constitute 'primitive accumulation' in highly diverse sites across the globe. Dispossession and displacement may be actuated in each case by quite diverse events and processes – from war and colonial occupation, to trade agreements, corporate extractive activity, and austerity politics – but the conceptual language of primitive accumulation gives our contributors a common grammar through which to understand global dispossessory forces in the present. However, not all of our authors accept the concept of primitive accumulation without adjustment, which they variously perform by means of engaging decolonial, autonomist Marxist, intersectional feminist, and other critical approaches.

Further, and in the final analysis, primitive accumulation appears variously as an urban or peri-urban phenomenon, as much as a feature of rural existence. It also features, not simply as the original inaugurator of colonial-capitalist development, but as a set of repeated processes of expropriation which should be situated very much *within* any theory of accumulation. Primitive accumulation is also presented with highly differential weightings on land and labour, with more explicitly settler colonial contexts characterised by the expropriation of the land and the removal of Indigenous populations, rather than their reproduction as part of the capitalist labour force.

Finally, as the collected papers in this feature attest to, resistance is always present, not only as a reaction to dispossessory forces, but also in the form of counter-forces which come to limit, shape, and/or circumvent strategies of dispossession. Thus primitive accumulation is always constituted already by the resistant forces, whether these are observable as organised counter-violence, disruptive action, collective 'steadfastness', or other 'quiet' modes of counter-cultivation and the remaking of the commons, in spite of the weight of power against such projects.

The editors are grateful for the time (and all-too-often thankless) work of the many anonymous peer reviewers of the papers that were included in this collection. Most of the papers had three reviewers (rather than two) which has been helped in improving manuscripts in terms of content, accuracy, theoretical cogency, and structural coherence.

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